

AMERICAN RECOVERY & REINVESTMENT ACT

**STATEMENT DURING DEBATE
HON. DAVID R. OBEY
OF WISCONSIN
IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
JANUARY 28, 2009**

Mr. Chairman, this economy is in crisis. The financial system of the country is in crisis. Retirement plans of millions of



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Americans have been destroyed. Families are angered and terrified. They see layoffs happening all around them. They and their friends are not only losing their jobs, they're losing health coverage, they're losing their ability to help their kids pay for college education.

President Bush, when he saw the initial stages of the problem, got Congress to give him \$750 billion to try to calm the chaos on Wall Street. President Obama is now looking for action to help Main Street.

This package is designed to create jobs through construction, through changing the way we do business in the field of energy. It attempt to try to help victims of the recession by providing unemployment insurance, by increasing their ability to get Medicaid coverage if they lose their health care coverage, by increasing their ability to be able to afford COBRA payments if they lose their health insurance. And this proposal is also aimed at rebuilding the economy, especially by changing the way this economy works in the energy area and in the science area and the technology area and I think we need to be about getting that done.

This bill is hugely expensive. But it's not nearly so costly as continuing business as usual.

It has a big price tag because we are dealing with a big problem.

Unfortunately, the debate has been incredibly trivialized. Last night, for instance, we heard speaker after speaker discuss the need to act, but then they would say, "Well, I can't vote for this package because it contains money for the arts or money for the mall." I'd like to put those two items in perspective.

The arts funding in this bill is a tiny fraction of this entire bill. The arts expenditure in this bill represents about six cents out of every \$1,000 contained in this legislation. People ask, "Well, what does funding for the arts have anything to do with jobs?" It's very simple. People in the arts field are losing their jobs just like anybody else. You have local arts agencies, you have local orchestras, local symphonies, local arts groups of all kinds who are shutting down, laying people off and in a number of instances going bankrupt. This is a small, tiny effort to keep some of those people employed over the next two years. I make no apology for it. We have an obligation to salvage as many jobs as we can, regardless of the fields in which people work.

The second issue is the Mall. People say, "Well, goodness, gracious. What on earth

does spending for the mall have to do with creating jobs?" well, Mr. chairman, I would point out that, again, the funding for the mall represents about 25 cents of every \$1,000 in this bill. A tiny, tiny fraction. Three quarters of that amount was directed at trying to preserve the Jefferson Memorial, which is slowly sinking into the tidal basin and needs to be salvaged.

But, because these items have become such distractions, we've decided to take several items out. So the Mall is gone. So we don't have to worry about refurbishing the Mall anymore. That will have to wait for another time.

My point in discussing these two items is to simply express my regret at the way this debate has been trivialized. But I also think it is revealing. Because I think it tells us what is really going on. And in my view, what's going on is this: at least one of the leaders in the Republican Caucus advised his caucus members that the way for the Republican minority to behave was to behave like a thousand mosquitoes to harass the majority. That may suit somebody's legislative style, it would not suit mine. But I think that comment is revelatory because that, for all practical purposes, is what we saw last night, many Members behaving like mosquitoes, focusing on trivia, ignoring the big picture.

Some people will say, "Oh, you're moving too fast." I would point out, this work should have been done three and four months ago. Some of us tried in September to pass a very small economic recovery package. The then Bush White House would have no part of it. They were not interested. So we've had to wait until now. But it is now essential for us to move. We've got to get this job on the road. Every week that we delay is another 100,000 or more people unemployed. I don't think we want that on any of our consciences.

This package is aimed at creating jobs. It's aimed at people most impacted by the recession. And it is aimed at trying to modernize and freshen parts of the economy so that we can rebuild the ability of middle income families to actually increase their income over time.

Mr. Chairman, the main reason we're in this fix today is because over the last almost 20 years or more we have had very little wage growth, very little income growth, on the part of average working families in this country. In fact, if you go back to the year 2001, 95% of the income growth in this country has gone into the pockets of the wealthiest 10% of American families. That means that the other 90% - the great Middle American family swath - have been trying to keep their head above water.

And how have they been doing it?

By borrowing.

So they borrowed for housing. They borrowed for tuition. They borrowed for health care. They borrowed for a lot of other things. And now the rubber-band has finally snapped.

The markets are in chaos. People are panicked.

We've got to do something to try to stabilize the situation. We have to try to re-inflate the purchasing power of consumers and we have to do it in such a way that we build an opportunity for average working families to raise their income again so that they aren't beset by the same economic problems that they were beset by the last 10 years.

With that, Mr. Chairman, I would urge an aye vote for this package, and I reserve the balance of my time.